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IMAGINATION IN ART.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

In an illustrated Talk by
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San Francisco

[illegible]

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LIBRARY OF THE
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

IMAGINATION IN ART.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

IT is important occasionally to come into the presence of the world's masterpieces. If we are at all sensitive, they say something to us which no teacher can express in words. This afternoon I propose to show you, not in any strict order, typical specimens of both Occidental and Oriental work; not so much for the purpose of drawing any specific conclusion, as with the desire that their lessons, should they have any for you, may be self-taught. An important part of education is to submit to the influence of good things. In the absence of direct impression, it is useless to force in any amount of verbal explanation.

But since the problems and qualities of art are many, it is incumbent upon me in choosing my series of illustrations to limit the scope of their lessons; and so I have selected examples which may tell us of the use of imagination.

This word "imagination" is one that is very loosely used by critics as well as artists. I suppose the majority of people think that the imagination is a sort of faculty of dreaming, that it is identical with revery, a vague enthusiasm of the mind; something weak, loose, and visionary; the very opposite of exactness and sharp-focussing. Now, I do not mean any such thing as this by imagination. As I understand imagination, it is a process as clear and exact as mathematics. It implies the closest mental construction. It is the faculty by

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which we distinguish between a good or bad combination of lines, even to the variation of a hair's breadth in each.

Others confuse imagination with what is sometimes called idealization. We sometimes speak of the imaginative artist as if, after going to nature for a certain amount of material, he then proceeded to manipulate and distort it into accord with some preconceived notion of what it ought to be. But this is no more what I understand imagination in art to imply. This is because such a subordination of facts to the point of view of an ideal would be to relate them to a universal. We sometimes read that the greatest art expresses a universal ideal. The Greeks, for instance, are supposed to have sought for the perfect facial and bodily type, by eliminating the defects of individual models. But if that were imagination, see what would be its result. It would reduce all works of art to one or two types. In proportion as art became more imaginative, it would become more alike, which is exactly contrary to the facts of history. In proportion as the art of all nations has become great and imaginative, it has become individual. Each creation of the imagination has a new stamp set upon it. Who has been able to imitate Phidias or Michel Angelo? They give no central, normal standard. Their work is exceptional and individual. Rather is it the absence of imagination in weaker periods, the use of universals either of external ideal, or of external fact, which has been the most notable cause of similarity and monotony.

Still others have confused imagination with decorative quality, an after-addition of superficial beauty to throw a veil of interest over something which has no interest in itself. This would be a compromise between fact and the desire for pleasure. But to define imagi-

nation by this pleasing effect seems like putting the cart before the horse. Pleasure gives no standard. An educated person may derive more pleasure from bad work than from good. If we admire imagination for its power of construction, *that* is the deeper cause of the pleasure, and defines it. And such construction underlies all great art, not merely successful ornament.

If, then, imagination is none of these things, what is it? Without attempting a formal definition, I should say that, in art, imagination is the faculty of thinking and feeling in terms of a single image. It implies the integrity, the wholeness and purity of the image.

Imagination comes from the word "image"; not a fancy, not a dream, not a vague blur of consciousness, but a clear, unbroken image. It is a visible integer. We know that painting, and sculpture, and architecture, and decoration may all be grouped under the term "visual arts." The faculty of sense by which we deal with them is sight; just as the sense of sound underlies the art of music. What then distinguishes artistic vision from ordinary vision? If we look about us carelessly over the world, in this room, anywhere, the retina of the eye becomes filled with a crowd of points, masses of sensations, which do not bear any definite, permanent, or significant relation to one another. They flow on in a vague stream, without beginning or end, without natural limit or boundary, ever-changing and indistinct, like a microscopic image out of focus. We cannot say that at any moment there is a single, definite, imagined total, or whole. Some portions may tend to flow together into a unified vision; but there are many unrelated intruders, and much that positively disturbs and disintegrates. If now we shut our eyes to keep out these confusing elements, the retina of the mind, so to speak, tends to lose the power of holding the remainder

together in a single image. A crowd of partial images, more or less loosely defined, crowd upon it, overlap, skip about aimlessly, and refuse to coalesce.

If, for instance, I try to imagine a certain man sitting in a chair, it is not enough to think the abstract thoughts of the man and the chair. A thought implies general relations, but not a concrete image. We have got to settle a host of clear visual relations. The question arises, "How shall the man's form be disposed, what shall be done with every finger even, every fold in his clothing? What comes behind and about to fill up the background? How far shall this background extend? Is there a table near? Can I see all these things as if they belonged together in a single picture?" Most people in such cases see only a vague agglomeration of parts, quite as indefinite and confused as ordinary sight. Moreover, they only think thoughts instead of seeing images. But visual art is to be distinguished from ordinary sight, from vague revery, and from imperfect phantasy, in this, that the artistic image has persistence, congruity, natural limits, a kind of organization within itself. In strong imagination it is singular and complete, a group of parts, lines and proportions, which lacks nothing essential to make its wholeness clear, which admits nothing that tends to distort the image, or disturb its integrity. Such, in brief, is artistic imagination, a natural faculty of man through which, whether as endowment at birth, or the fruit of discipline, one can have and retain spontaneous images, pure, clear, simple, whole. The power to hold them is essential to execution, but the true mystery of the faculty is the spontaneity and integrity of its images.

In a work of art this quality depends upon the relations of the several lines which mark the differentiation of its parts. If across any piece of blank paper we draw

lines, we thereby differentiate visual parts, which parts, as well as their lines, bear definite relations toward one another. If these relations are such that any one distracts the attention from others to itself, contradicts any of the others, or makes it less easy for us to follow the lines and to understand the meaning of the disposition of the parts, then there is no single image, the line-intention is blurred. But if, as can never happen by accident, each line, each area, and each proportion between the areas is such that it positively assists the value and meaning of all the others, so that all can be seen in their intended force only through this peculiar juxtaposition, then a single artistic image crystallizes, so to speak, out of the mass of units. When the areas cut by the lines are filled in with dark and light masses or with colors, a new factor is added to the image, which factor not only must not contradict the line-structure, but must even enforce and clarify it. No doubt the relative importance of parts can, in this way, become somewhat modified, and their harmony enriched; but of themselves, without the fundamental unity of the lines, mass and color can produce no clear image. To appreciate this quality in the work of others implies the possession of imagination in a certain degree. But the full power of imagination is exhibited in the spontaneous creation of images which did not before exist. The raw material of nature can never quite take the place of imagination. It is the prerogative of the latter to organize the former. The difference between art and ordinary vision does not lie in a mathematical degree of accuracy, but in the chemical union of affinities which rare souls detect.

Such a faculty of imagination is rather uncommon in the work of modern art, whether European or Oriental. It seems to be something that the training of

recent centuries has crushed out of the soul. Perhaps this is because we are more interested in thoughts than in images. Now a thought, though valuable in its way, is something very different from an image. At best a thought can be only a very partial image. A thought is an abstraction, the dropping of particulars, and the holding on to a few universal relations. It is clear in proportion as it becomes narrow, and unencumbered with details. It is like an algebraic equation in terms of x and y. But an image is concrete and individual, full of particulars and individual relations. It is clear in proportion as it becomes rich in details whose meanings interpenetrate. Therefore, a thought is utterly inadequate to produce or suggest an image. He who works in thoughts works in parts. Scientific literature and criticism are thoughts. The idea of a *subject* for painting is only a thought. Of itself it produces no visual image. We have educated our children too much to think, too little to see and feel wholes. No wonder a child frequently draws the bottom of a cylinder on one part of his paper, and its side on another. Such separation is just what abstract thought works. But the old masters of art in all its forms had not yet yielded to this tiresome pedantry of the intellect. They had the fresh, childlike power of seeing things in terms of pure images, of creating these images from the wealth of their own natures. The great Greek sculptors had it; the masters of the fifteenth century in Italy had it. So also the Chinese and Japanese artists of the eighth, twelfth, and fifteenth centuries had it. Occasionally we see it in the work of recent times. If under such diverse manifestations we can trace a similarity in the power of imaginative structure, we shall have learned one of the great lessons of history.

But, before closing these remarks, I must warn you

against thinking that this ability to work in images can be got by applying any formula, or following an educational method. It does not arise from a special and superficial branch of instruction called composition. You must not think that what I hope to show you is some trick or mathematical short cut to genius. No doubt our debilitated minds crave a perfected machinery for learning art. We sometimes applaud when we hear it said that fine images are got by putting the main parts of our picture into the form of a triangle, of a circle, or what not. We are pleased to find it all so easy. But let me show you just where the fallacy lies in this idea that you can learn to develop your imagination by rule. A rule is a universal, a common method which can apply equally to all cases that come under it. It should therefore produce nearly identical results throughout the world's art. This is the opposite of the truth. Imagination is creative. The image is individual, and can never digest an intractable formula. Every element that enters into an imaginative group must be plastic and sensitive, full, as it were, of chemical affinities, through which the just and crystalline balance can be rapidly found. This mystery of genius, this quick power of the imagination, which seems in a moment to explore a million possible combinations, and to seize upon the right one, is significantly called by Kant the faculty of Judgment. By this he does not mean the cold weighing of the intellect, but an almost intuitive seizing upon the capacity for organization in one's raw material.

That is why imagination implies originality. To copy or imitate is an analytical act, an arbitrary assumption of some abstract factor as typical, the slow following of qualities one by one which were fused in a single creative act. If I say to myself, "I wish to imitate that

master's style," style itself becomes for me an abstraction; a universal, a thought, no longer an image. To copy, one must have the whole spirit, the creative grasp of the master within himself; yet, if he had it, he would never copy. I do not, of course, condemn copying as an exercise; I only point out its antithesis to the process of imagination. This is why we cannot directly teach composition, only inspire it in our pupils by great examples. Imagination is a native faculty which can only be developed by exercise. It grows in the atmosphere of the masters. We can point out its presence or its absence, though we cannot fully explain it in words. The insight comes over one with a rush; we thrill with the silent revelation of concentrated meaning. So is it also a faculty that can be crushed by neglect or abuse. If, when you study art, your vision is filled with works which have not this quality, if you think more of abstract fact than of concrete structure, if you substitute thoughts for images, if pride or greed warp the delicate action of your judgment, then the faculty of imagination within you tends to decay. The normal growth in periods of great art, of apprentices in the studios of masters, of rivals in the continuous service of public decoration, is chiefly due to the opportunity to breathe the spirit of the great work about them. This should be the educational function of art museums, to exhale this spirit for all. To-day I bring you for the first time in human history into the united presences of the greatest imaginative work in European and in Asiatic art.

Then followed an exhibition of about one hundred and fifty lantern slides, following no chronological order, but mingling Japanese sculpture of the eighth century with the finest specimens of Greek; Chinese and Japanese painting of the twelfth and fifteenth cen-

turies with the best Renaissance, Dutch, and modern French. This exhibition was accompanied by comments on each masterpiece; some of the illustrations being purposely reversed in the image, and a few being introduced to illustrate the absence of imaginative quality. The demonstration of close similarity in power of imaginative construction between the arts of the two hemispheres, was a revelation to most of the audience.

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